FOR THE MAN WHO HAS EVERYTHING
Luke 19:1-10
June 15, 1980

John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

What do you suppose prompts a dignified businessman to hitch up his robe and climb a tree? What kind of man would do it? Not a public official, certainly, a man who had a responsible, prestigious position, not a respectable pillar of the community. The power of propriety and appropriate public behavior is simply too great to allow it.

Why would a man make a public spectacle of himself? The answer, I suppose, is implicit in the question. We do what we must do. We will, in fact, risk appearing foolish if we are desperate enough, if we hurt badly enough, if we can no longer stand the dead weight of the status quo.

Zacchaeus, Chief Administrator of the Roman tax office in the city of Jericho, 33 AD, made a public fool of himself one day. Luke's terse account of his encounter with Jesus is loaded with detail. In a very few words we manage to learn a lot about Zacchaeus Jericho, "the quintessential suburb" someone called it once; a beautiful city known for its palace, its magnificent roses, the scent of its balsam groves which it exported throughout the world. The Chief Tax Collector in Jericho was a very important man who lived comfortably. He was a man who could make difficult decisions. He had not floundered about tryin to decide what to do with his life. He chose his goal, pursued it, and accomplished it. "He was," Luke reports, "rich." He got that way honestly, but by participating in one of the most despicably effective systems an occupying power has ever devised to collect revenues. Rome recruited citizens of its conquered nations to serve as tax collectors and made it a very profitable profession. Levi, or Matthew, one of the Apostles, was a tax collector. We know that occupied people hate their countrymen who profit from their arrangements with the occupiers. We know, that is to say, that Zacchaeus was not liked, in fact he was loathed by his peers. We know, simply, that he sacrificed respect and esteem for money.

We also know that he was too short to see in a crowd and that he wanted to see Jesus urgently enough to make a fool of himself in the process. Climbing a tree to get a better view of an itinerant preacher from Nazareth of all places, is not the kind of thing the Chief Tax Collector in Jericho did ordinarily.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh said on Sixty Minutes recently that "We worship success: but we really don't like the successful. We're envious of them." Perhaps Zacchaeus had, for too long, borne the burden of his nation's contempt. Maybe he had no pride left, only desperate loneliness. The scholars and commentators have speculated endlessly on his motives. John R. Bodo writes: "Perhaps it was idle curiosity. Perhaps he was taking a long chance on satisfying some hidden hunger, some vitamin deficiency of the spirit, that his rich fare of high living had left within him. Or perhaps he had sunk to such depths of boredom that he was ready to welcome anything - spiritualism, Yoga, LSD - anything that promised speedy and painless relief." (A Gallery of New Testament Rogues, p.48).

In any event he did it. The pathetic little tax man scrambled up a tree and Jesus saw him, invited himself to dinner, Zacchaeus scrambled down, absolutely delighted with himself, and as the pious onlookers are murmuring about Jesus' choice of dinner companions Zacchaeus is running on and on about how meticulously fair and honest he has always been. Jesus says finally that today salvation, healing, wholeness is coming to Zacchaeus' house and that he, Jesus, wants to do that for people who are lost. That's lost as in "taking the wrong turn and walking aimlessly" - not as in eternal damnation. The Greek word, which is a disappointment to some people is simply the term for "wandering about without a goal.' That's Zacchaeus' problem, according to Jesus. He has everything he, or anybody else, would want to have. But he doesn't have the important thing - a goal, a direction, a purpose. He's lost - or was lost, rather. Now someone found him.

"For the man who has everything". What do you give to a man who already owns everything you can think of? Zacchaeus had everything money could buy and yet nothing, and somehow it doesn't seem unreasonable to conclude that they are related. One of the most consistent byproducts of prosperity and affluence, it seems,is the conclusion that there must be more to life than this. We knew it all along, of course, but desperately hoping it wasn't true, we went after things and when we got the things realized it wasn't really what we wanted. The best thinkers we are producing are busy analyzing that. Paul Tournier, Swiss physician and theologian wrote recently, "Industrialization has created all the benefits of a prosperity the world has never known before, thanks to which great social progress has been possible; but it has scarcely favored the development and the welfare of the human person..."(The Violence Within, p.173).

Tournier parts ways with those who criticize science, industrialization and technology as the culprits. "The mistake", he maintains, "has been to expect of science and technology something that they are unable to provide." (Ob.cit. p.174).

On a personal level, the golden promise of ever-increasing prosperity has been a dominant motif all of our lives. We have been weaned on the idea that meaning is owning, that property is sacred, that joy is buying. I was skimming through Esquire Magazine last week, reading the Father's Day ads, appropriately enough!

They are quite specific. Esquire hopes American fathers will be celebrated with Polaroid cameras, romantic trips to Mexico, Jovan scents, knit shirts with the correct alligator attached, Head tennis racquets, Seagrams VO..."Treat yourself like company. The symbol of imported luxury", and diamond cufflinks on a blue denim shirt at $2,200 a pair, to show that he's "no ordinary cowboy". In the midst of all that I happened on an editorial on Ethics, of all things, by Harry Stein, and this stunning paragraph...

> "It's difficult to grow up American and not envy...A hundred times a day, overtly and subtly, from the media and those around us, we receive the message: getting, having, being able to show off what one has - that is what counts. It is like a swarming army, this value system, burying our better instincts, overwhelming our skepticism." (Esquire, June 1980, Thy Neighbor's Life).

It was a disturbing article, particularly in view of our concern for the economy, the availability of energy and the uncertainty of the future. Stein believes that our way of life as it has evolved in recent decades is fueled by envy."Which is why," he writes, "there are so many ulcers in this bountiful land. No emotion is so corrosive of the system and the soul as accute envy. Unlike hatred, or lust or anger, it is internalized and there is nothing therapeutic about it." And then, in a paragraph that reminded me of the story of Zacchaeus..."Envy promotes our baser traits...Invariably we end up looking as terribly small as we feel. It is damn near impossible to envy with style."

Lostness, drifting, envy, boredom...is it simply part of the human condition? It seems to have no favorites. Rich people sometimes comfort themselves with the illusion that poor people are free, untroubled, relaxed: poor people think rich people have everything and no reason whatever to be dissatisfied and both are wrong about one another.

The man who has everything money can buy has nothing ultimately: we know that already. But he doesn't even have much relatively if, like the little tax collector in Jericho, he has sacrificed his self-esteem and the respect of his peers and his integrity and perhaps his family along the way.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ enters the debate at this point in time looking like a modest minority report. It suggests that the essence of full human life is not getting -

but letting go. It suggests that to give your life to the goal of acquiring things is the equivalent of driving around in a strange city, totally lost, without even a sense of north and south. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the modest suggesting that to be fully human - to be whole - is not to accumulate as fast as we can, but to give ourselves away - totally, without holding back anything. The Gospel is the simple suggestion that we can stop trying to prove ourselves and simply open our lives to God's gracious, accepting love. In fact, the Gospel is the refreshingly honest suggestion that happy, whole people won't be the ones worrying about appearance, prestige and propriety, but the ones determined and free enough to hitch up their robes and climb the nearest tree in order not to miss Jesus.

I'm entranced with the fact that the tax man climbed the tree. I've always been fascinated with the fact that a man who had everything knew how little he really had and was willing to make himself look foolish. I think that's at least part of the word of God here for us. And I'm entranced with the notion that God himself made Zacchaeus so self-consciously uncomfortable with his life. I'm fascinated with the notion that the very best evidence for God's existence is our need for Him and the corresponding notion that our searching for Him is simply the way His moving toward us feels.

There is precedent: centuries ago Augustine wrote his Confessions in his maturity and observed...

> "When first I knew thee, Thou didst raise me up, that I might see there was somewhat for me to see, though as yet I was not fit to see it."
> (Confessions VIII, 10).

God himself, Augustine believed, stimulated a man to open his eyes and see. And elsewhere he wrote beautifully, in a way familiar to all...

> "Thou hast made us restless, until we find our rest in Thee."

The story of Zacchaeus is of a man searching, and being found. And my own maturing conviction is that the searching, and the frustration, disenchantment and restlessness behind it, is the work of God himself, that God's encounter with us may be nothing more provocative than an itch we can't scratch, or a question we can't answer, or a thirst we can't quench.

Jesus looked up and saw Zacchaeus perched in a tree. Simple as that. God doesn't always find us dramatically, shatteringly or even appropriately. He bumps into us sometimes quietly. Or He pursues like the Hound of Heaven, and if Francis Thompson's metaphor is too heavy you may prefer William Muehl's more earthy observation that God comes mostly like the "invasion of mice into a pantry or ants into a picnic basket."

He offers - not answers to all our questions, but himself. That's how the story goes. Jesus went home to dine with Zacchaeus.He offered friendship, understanding, forgiveness, acceptance. And I have the impression that Zacchaeus was a new man: that Jesus gave him his life back and perhaps his family and friends as well, and certainly his self-esteem. That is to say Zacchaeus was found, saved, no longer lost.

And for a man who has nothing, that is everything indeed.

Amen.

God Eternal, we are grateful for Your patient searching for us. Grant us, O God, freedom to look foolish for Your sake, to risk our dignity in searching for You. And as we seek, find us - through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.